

THE BLACK JEWS OF ETHIOPIA

An Expedition to the Falashas

WOLF LESLAU

IN 1946 I undertook a scientific expedition, under the joint auspices of the Guggenheim Foundation and the Viking Fund, to study the languages, folklore, and traditional history of Ethiopia. In the course of this expedition I decided to include a special survey of the Falashas, Ethiopia's famed "Black Jews," who for centuries have lived in the most remote areas of the country.

Until recently, the Falashas believed themselves to be the sole surviving Jews of the world; and since their rediscovery in the 18th century they have constituted an unending mystery to the scientific investigator.

Everything concerning their origin and historical past is a matter for speculation. Whether they are ethnically Jews; whence and when they migrated to Ethiopia, or, on the other hand, whether they represent a part of the native Ethiopian population which was converted at some remote time to Juda-

For centuries the Falashas, the "Black Jews" of Ethiopia, have been the subject of contradictory, often wild, reports and speculations, making them out to be almost everything from the descendants of the lost tribes of Israel to figments of an explorer's imagination. WOLF LESLAU, one of the world's foremost authorities on Ethiopia, here tells from first-hand knowledge what he learned of the Ethiopian Jews on a recent expedition to the country, against the background of what has been already known and recorded. Dr. Leslau is the author of several books on Ethiopic philology and has contributed widely to scholarly journals. He was born in 1906, studied at the universities of Vienna and Paris, and has been on the staff of the *École Nationale des Langues Orientales* (Paris), *École des Hautes Études* (Paris and New York), and the *Asia Institute* (New York). A more extended study of the Falashas by Dr. Leslau will appear in the *Falasha Anthology* to be published in the series of *Yale Judaica Research*.

ism, and if so, by whom—all of these problems still go unsolved. From the available evidence, only one thing is clear: their Judaism seems to date from some time before the compilation of the Mishnah and the Talmud, for they are completely ignorant of all the religious writings of the period since the Dispersion.

Arriving in Addis Ababa, I became friendly with the leading spiritual figures among the Falashas—Professor Taamrat Emanuel, one of the finest scholars in Ethiopia, and Ato Taddese Yakob, the Director of Customs in the Ethiopian government, and these men helped me to contact the Falashas living in the region around the city of Gondar.

Accompanied by two Falasha guides, their servants, and a cook who had been provided for me through the courtesy of Princess Tenegn Worq of the Ethiopian royal family, and Bitwaddad Andarge, governor of Begemder, son-in-law of the Emperor, I left Gondar for the interior. News of my departure had somehow preceded me, for after only an hour's mule ride I was accosted by two young Falashas armed with rifles who suddenly appeared on the crest of a hill. After one more hour had passed fifty Falashas, both old and young and armed with rifles and spears, emerged from the thicket and joined my entourage. The strong, resolute expressions which one saw on the faces of these men, set against the rugged and mountainous landscape, was an impressive sight and helped me to understand more readily the centuries-long resistance of the Falashas during the punitive wars of the Ethiopian kings.

The source for our information about these wars are the Ethiopian Royal Chronicles. But these records, too, since they deal exclusively with the military campaigns of the Ethiopian kings, cannot give us any real insight into

the past religious, social, and cultural circumstances of Falasha life. One historical fact is indubitable: a fierce though intermittent war between Ethiopians and Falashas was fought until the 17th century. And although the motivation for this war can be chiefly found in the Ethiopian kings' conversion to Christianity, there is also no doubt that its purpose was more often political than religious and was aimed at destroying the Falashas' independence.

It was King Malak Sagad, a potent figure in Ethiopian history, who in the 16th century succeeded, after a long and bitter war, in subjugating the Falashas and executing their warrior-chief Rada'i. On this occasion, as on many others, the Ethiopian historian expresses admiration for the courageous Falasha women, who, rather than fall into the hands of their conquerors, hurled themselves into a deep ravine.

But even after this great defeat the Falashas stubbornly defended their fast-disappearing independence. In the 17th century, a great Falasha chief, Gedeon, arose and revived his people for a time by making an alliance with a group of Ethiopian chiefs who were in rebellion against the King Susneyos. At the last, Gedeon was killed and the Falasha army decisively vanquished. Expelled from Semyen, their home country for centuries, and dispersed throughout the land, many Falashas lost their faith and converted to Christianity. It is at this point that the Falashas disappear from the pages of the Ethiopian Royal Chronicles.

SURROUNDED now by my advance-guard party of Falashas, I continued my journey, crossing rivers and valleys and trudging up mountains. Soon we were on a high, beautiful plateau, swept by cooling winds and covered with trees and lush long grass. Here, on this green tableland encircled by mountains, Falashas have lived for centuries. Outside the village of Ambworo, one of the advance guard blew a warning trumpet. At its summons men came swarming from all directions to greet me. The Falasha priests, dressed in ceremonial robes and

sheltered by sunshades, held a ceremony on the top of a hill, sanctifying my arrival by prayers in the old Ethiopian language, Gheez, accompanied by a music beat out on drums and a kind of metal gong.

When I first saw the Falashas I asked myself whether I would be able to distinguish them from other Ethiopians, whether they possessed distinctive physiognomical features of their own. I decided at first that in the great majority the Falashas resembled the Amharas, the main group of the Ethiopian population, and like them, had finely cut, regular features, and skin of a light black color. Later, however, when I went to Eritrea, the most northern part of Ethiopia, I found that the Bogos, an indigenous Agau tribe of the region, bore a great resemblance to many of the Falashas I had seen. The Falashas themselves believe that they look like the rest of the Ethiopian population; indeed one Falasha informed me that Ethiopians say that they can recognize a Falasha only by the heavy mineral odor of water which clings to him as a result of his incessant ritual ablutions.

In all matters of outward appearance and living conditions, little distinguishes them from the native Ethiopians. The Falasha's dress is the same (the universal costume: a cotton toga called the *shamma* and long or knee-length pants) and his villages, composed of circular huts made of branches, and covered—or thatched—with thick grass, with granaries built of dried mud alongside them, look like those seen everywhere in the Ethiopian hinterland. Most often, these villages, like the Ethiopian ones, are placed beside a river, though the Falashas have, besides the ordinary reasons for such a location in a semi-tropical country, the added religious necessity of complying with the hygienic injunctions of the Mosaic law.

Living in a predominantly agricultural country, the Falashas have a special position as skilled artisans, supplying their Ethiopian neighbors with linen cloth, kitchen utensils, and farming equipment. Walking through a Falasha village, one sees on every hand evidence of their various skills: in one corner,

above a loom built over a pit in the ground, a man stands weaving linen; in another, a blacksmith is working iron utensils such as axes, sickles, and knives over an open fire; and in still another, a Falasha woman is fashioning pitchers, pots, and small granaries out of clay. All these products are sold in the market of the nearest town or among the surrounding villages. Despite this small trade, the Falashas can no more be considered merchants than the peasant who sells his produce. Indeed, the Falashas could never become merchants because of their strict observance of the Hebrew religious code: the Ethiopian merchant must journey by caravan, which would mean that the Falasha would have to travel on the Sabbath and eat food prepared by strangers.

Of course, the Falashas also cultivate the land; outside every Falasha village stretch fields on which they grow crops of wheat, barley, and millet. One often sees them at work there, plowing or tilling the fields behind one ox or a team of oxen. These fields are never the property of the Falashas, who work them on a sharecropper basis, paying rent to the owner in the form of annual supplies of wheat.

ALMOST every large Falasha village has a synagogue, called the *Masgid*, with at least one resident priest. The hut housing the synagogue looks no different in its exterior from the average Falasha dwelling; it is circular or oblong, thatched with straw, and, depending on its size, has two or four entrances. Inside, the synagogues are also rather uniform: in the village of Atcharge in the Sequelt region the synagogue's interior was one large room partitioned down the middle by a wall as high as a man; at Gana it was built of stone and was also divided into two sections. In the synagogue of Gana the outer section forms a circle which surrounds a quadrangular space called *Queddesta Queddusan* or the "Holy of Holies."

Only the high priests, the priests, and the deacon are permitted to enter the Holy of Holies, where the Torah and the ceremonial clothes of the priests are kept. In a synagogue

that lacks a Holy of Holies, the Torah is fastened to a board attached high on the east wall, facing Jerusalem, and the robes are stored in the priests' house.

The synagogue is also decorated with drapes of cotton cloth of various colors that hang from the walls and festoon the Torah. A bench, called "the place of repose," is so placed that the priests may rest after their devotions. On the Sabbath and the high holidays the deacons spread grass and various herbs on the floor of the synagogue, giving the rooms a refreshing country odor.

The priesthood is not a hereditary office. Its members are recruited from the entire community, which participates as a body in nominating candidates. After a candidate is proposed, the high priest then confers with the other priests, called *Kahen*, and together they examine his character and degree of learning. If any member of his family as far back as the seventh generation has ever committed adultery, or has had a bodily defect of any kind, the candidate cannot be elected to the priesthood.

After passing these tests, the candidate has to bring two offerings to the synagogue: a goat for the remission of his sins and a sheep as a gift to the priests; the goat is burned as a sacrifice and the sheep is eaten by the priests and the deacon. Before receiving his final blessing, the candidate then brings a bull to the synagogue, slaughters it himself, and all members of the village, men and women, attend a feast at which the roasted bull is eaten. Also, as part of the celebration, the people of the village bring gifts of money for the priests, each according to his means. The ordination ceremony then takes place: the priest places a turban on the candidate's head, clothes him in a shirt, and from that time on the new priest can take up his duties.

Once a priest, a Falasha can marry but cannot get divorced; if he does he can no longer function as a priest and becomes a *debtera*, that is, a learned man, who may perform prayers and aid priests in their various duties. In the event that his wife dies the priest can then remarry, but only a virgin.

The priest does not dress differently from other Falashas; the only badge of his office is a turban similar to those worn by priests in the Ethiopian Christian church.

Every large community supports a high priest, who is chosen from among the other priests. Both the high priest and the priests perform the daily prayers at the synagogue, pray for the sick, bless the circumcised child and the newly married. They also officiate at the slaughter of the sacrificial animal and bless the Sabbath and festival offerings. In all matters of community welfare and policy, the priests, as the chief spiritual authority, are looked to for guidance and leadership.

Yet despite their high position in the community, the priests do not constitute a privileged caste and must work like all other Falashas at the common occupations. There is one exception to this custom; since it is deemed beneath his dignity, the high priest is not permitted to work as a blacksmith.

ANOTHER religious institution found among the Falashas—the institution of monks—unmistakably reflects their long exposure to Christian influences. The Falashas claim that these monasteries can be traced back to the time of Abba Sabra who, in the 15th century, converted the son of the Ethiopian king Zar'a Yakob (1434-68) to Judaism. The royal convert then founded the monastic order and compiled many prayers which still form an important part of Falasha liturgy.

Any Falasha who wishes to renounce his worldly life may stand for the monkhood. In most cases, future monks are recruited from among those who have been servants to the monks. Before taking his vows, the candidate must obtain his parents' consent. Once admitted to the brotherhood, a monk cannot marry and cannot have relations with other members of the community. If forced to come into contact with other Falashas, he is then considered tainted and must change his clothes and perform ritual ablutions.

It is not uncommon for a monk to leave his village or monastery and go to live in a deserted place in search of divine inspiration;

when he returns to his native village, he is then regarded as a saint. Falasha history numbers many such saints and a good part of their religious texts consist of the preachings of these men.

Having heard that there were several monks in Atcharge, I went to visit them, accompanied by two young Falashas. We arrived early in the morning. The monks' huts were on the outskirts of the village, enclosed by a stone wall over which it was forbidden to pass. There were three monks at Atcharge, all very old and two of them nearly blind. They told me that they had vivid memories of all the Jews and Protestant missionaries who had visited them over the last fifty years. Indeed, at the start, they were reluctant to speak with me, fearing that I might be a Protestant missionary who had come to convert them. Only after the other Falashas reassured them did they consent to meeting me. Unfortunately, their conversation took the form of a religious monologue about the Jewish faith, interesting in itself but lacking information about the life led by monks or saints. While at Atcharge I also heard of the existence of nuns who live much the same as the monks, but I never found the opportunity to visit them.

THE Old Testament and especially the Apocryphal "Book of Jubilees" constitute the chief sources of Falasha religious law and precept; both of these works, along with most of their religious literature, are written in the language of Gheez or Old Ethiopic. As I mentioned, Falasha Judaism is completely pre-Dispersion and therefore the Talmud or any of the other post-Biblical literary works, with the exception of fragmentary pieces of apocrypha, are unknown.

The Falashas only venerate the handwritten copy of the Torah and, unlike Western Jewry, do not think it sinful to place the copy of the Torah on the floor or to allow any member of the community, priest or layman, to touch it. The sacred copy of the Torah is read aloud on the Sabbath and the high holidays, and, since it is written in Gheez, a language not understood by the

ordinary Falasha, the priest must compose a running translation of the text into Amharic, the spoken language.

The Falashas also possess the "Commandments of the Sabbath." This writing is composed of two intertwined strands: myths of Arabic origin, which take their characters and plots from the Old Testament, combined with whole passages from the aforementioned "Book of Jubilees." An interesting conception of the Sabbath is expressed in its pages; the Sabbath is presented as a kind of saintly presence, a living personification of the holy.

For the benefit of the reader I give here an extract of a Falasha prayer:

"Halleluyah. Praise is comely for Thee, O God, majesty and honor. Thou Most High, who sittest upon a lofty throne, in that Thou art the grace of the just, the crown of the pure, the exaltation of the humble, the strength of the weak. Halleluyah to the only God, Holy, Holy, Holy. Thou art merciful and gracious, Thou exaltest the lowly and girdest the strong. Thou alone art kind and lord of justice and righteousness. Praise to God, the one, the Most High who sittest in Heaven. He is blessed in the height of heaven, His name is holy and pure. Praise and glory to God who is in heaven and on earth.

"Praised be the praised God, who protected me, delivered me, redeemed me, who spared me from my youth to that day I fell into hunger, pestilence, war, and sore illness; when I fell on the road, into caverns and water; when I fell to be carrion for the beasts of the field and the fowl of the air. God strengthened me even when He saw and knew all my sins and understood the uncleanness of my heart. He is just, merciful, longsuffering, abundant in mercy and justice. He was patient toward me, He the gracious, the merciful in the multitude of His mercies, His grace and patience; the gracious and the abundant in truth who protected me and brought me [to heaven] as He does to the righteous and the angels, for nought; not in our justice but in His justice. Blessed and glorified be the name of the blessed God."

All the cardinal points of Falasha belief

and ritual can be traced to this body of religious writings. The Falashas fervently believe in "the God of Israel, the invisible, the creator of heaven and earth," and, with obvious Christian undertones, in a Paradise and a Hell, in angels, and the Last Judgment. Another distinctive feature of Falasha belief is that they have their own Messiah, whose name is Theodore and who descends directly from the House of David. Before the Messiah's coming, the Falashas prophesy, all countries will engage in universal war. At the end of this war, the Messiah will appear and reign in Ethiopia for forty years before proceeding to Palestine.

Though their literature is written in Gheez, the spoken language of the Falashas conforms to that of their Ethiopian neighbors; in the Amharic-speaking regions they speak Amharic, the national language of Ethiopia, while in the northern, or Tigrigna-speaking region, they speak Tigrigna.

Formerly they spoke a language belonging to the Agau group, of Cushitic origin. In the mountainous regions of Semyen they seem still to speak some of the Agau dialects.

All historical evidence points to the fact that the Falashas have never at any period spoken Hebrew.

IT IS, however, in their festivals and fast days that the Falashas show their greatest divergence from the Ethiopians, having weekly, monthly, lunar, and yearly festivals and fasts; some of the lunar festivals are celebrated only as reminders of the main festivals. A festival corresponding to Rosh Hashanah is called "The Light Has Appeared" and is celebrated on the 1st day of the 7th moon. "The Feast of Harvest" is celebrated the 12th day of the 3rd moon. The people bring to the synagogue measures of grain or baked bread and the priests bless it.

The first and last days of the Passover celebration (as well as of the Feast of Tabernacles) are named "the Holy" and no work or travel of any kind is permitted. As for the rest of Passover, work is also prohibited, though Falashas may travel to other

villages to visit relatives or friends. Throughout Passover the Falashas cannot eat anything that is leavened or fermented; at the close of the festival, the newly brewed beer and newly baked bread are brought to the synagogue as offerings to the priests.

On the Feast of the Tabernacles (Suk-koth) the Falashas do not build special booths since they look upon their own huts as the wilderness-booths of their exile. During this feast also, all work is suspended and the floors of their houses and the synagogue are covered with the leaves of a kind of palm and weeping willow tree. On the last day the priests and deacons carry the Torah in a grand procession through the village and the people gather at the synagogue and dance.

The Falashas also have several weekly, monthly, and yearly fasts. The most important is the Day of Atonement celebrated on the 10th day of the 7th moon. Before the end of the prayers they put a handful of millet on stones, leaving it there for the birds. This is done to commemorate the dead.

They repeat the same ceremony three times at the Fast of Supplication, observed on the twenty-ninth day of the eighth moon. On that day all the people carry stones on their shoulders, bring them to a hill outside the village, and place them in a circle around the priests who perform prayers. The Falashas, having no knowledge of Judaism's national holidays, do not celebrate Hanukka.

Following the detailed prescriptions laid down in the Falasha work, "The Commandments of the Sabbath," the Sabbath is celebrated in a very strict manner. The Falashas have various names for their transcendental embodiment of the Sabbath: "luminous," "vivifying," "rejoicing," "beloved." In their belief, the Sabbath is constantly interceding with God, asking him to forgive sinners their evil deeds if they observe the Sabbath properly.

On Friday evening the Falasha women start their elaborate preparations; before cooking the Sabbath food they must first wash their clothes and bodies in the river. The men also quit work at midday and perform the same ritual ablutions. As soon as the

sun sets, all the fires in the village are extinguished until the Sabbath is over. Throughout the Sabbath no work of any kind is permitted. Sexual intercourse, the circumcision of children, the burial of the dead, and all fasts, with the exception of the fast on the Day of Atonement, are prohibited.

In the regions I visited the practice of animal sacrifice still existed, though severely curtailed to only one sacrifice a year, which takes place on the fourteenth day of Nisan, the eve of Passover. This is due to the relative poverty of the community, for to hold a sacrifice it is necessary not only to purchase an animal but also to prepare bread and beer. All sacrifices are offered on an altar, called the "Area of Sacrifice," located on the north side of the synagogue. The sacrificial animal may be a bull, a ram, or a goat, meeting the Old Testament requirements of not being blind, lame, or having any bodily defect. A bar of salt, called *amolye*, is held over the animal's back during the ceremony in accordance with Leviticus 2:13—"and every oblation of thy meat offering shalt thou season with salt."

After the priest has finished his benediction, he leads the animal to the "Area of Sacrifice" and slaughters it with a two-edged knife designed especially for this purpose. Then, with the leaves of two different trees, he sprinkles the blood of the sacrificed animal over the "Area of Sacrifice" and the floor of the synagogue. The animal's meat is eaten that same day by the priests and the men of the village, and its bones, skin, and entrails are then burned and buried in a secret and far-off place. Custom forbids women from taking part in this ceremony.

IF A Falasha changes his faith or marries a non-Falasha he can be excluded from the community. On the other hand, any person who wishes to be converted to the Jewish faith must undergo a complicated initiation. To begin with, he must bring a bar of salt to the Falasha priest, who gives him in return a handful of peas, which, with water, will be his only sustenance for seven days. During this seven-day period, the priest instructs

him in the Mosaic Law. On the evening of the seventh day, the candidate for conversion washes his body and clothing, shaves his head, and comes to the synagogue where the priests and elders are gathered, carrying seven rods as a token of his seven days of religious preparation. The candidate then falls flat on his face, the priest strikes him a light blow on the back and then destroys the bundle of rods. At the end of this ceremony, the priest distributes fresh bread to the worshippers and the new convert.

Many Falasha customs are merely variations of customs practiced by the Ethiopians, yet several bear distinctly indigenous features. The ritual attending the birth of a child is certainly one of these. As soon as the woman begins her labor, she must enter, accompanied by two midwives, the "hut of blood" or "malediction," a special hut constructed on the outskirts of the village. If the child is a male, he is circumcised on the eighth day and the parents donate a sum of money to the priest. Meanwhile, the mother must remain for seven days in the "hut of blood," and can eat anything but meat. The mother remains in the "hut of blood" for fourteen days if the child is a female and on leaving it performs the ritual ablutions. She then enters another special hut, built by her relatives, the "hut of the woman-in-childbirth," and remains there for thirty-two days if the child is male, or sixty-four days if it is female. On the last day of the vigil, she again performs the ritual ablutions, shaves her head, and returns to her home. On her arrival a feast is given for the relatives and neighbors. Following which "the hut of the woman-in-childbirth" is burnt to the ground as an impure habitation.

The "hut of blood" is also used by a Falasha woman at the time of her menstrual period. She leaves her work and stays there for seven days, during which time she is considered impure. Her segregation is complete; her family can bring her food but must not cross the low stone wall which encircles the hut. On the seventh day the woman performs the ritual ablutions and washes her clothes but must remain outside the village through-

out the day, returning to her home only after sunset.

The occasions on which a Falasha can be rendered impure are numerous. Coming into contact with a non-Falasha, helping at a burial and touching the corpse or the grave, touching a dead animal—all these are such occasions and carry with them varying periods of segregation from the community. When a priest has sexual intercourse with his wife, both he and his wife are segregated for one day. Whoever performs a circumcision must also remain outside the village for one day. On their return, all these offenders must wash their clothes and bodies before entering the village.

Circumcision is usually performed by a woman. On the day of the ceremony, which takes place the eighth day after the birth, the priest blesses the unleavened bread which has been brought as an offering by the father and the elders cut it into slices and give it to the children, who pass the day singing and dancing. As is customary throughout Ethiopia, the Falasha girl-child also undergoes a ritual operation comparable to circumcision.

WHEN a Falasha girl reaches ten years and a Falasha boy seventeen years, they are permitted to enter into marriage. As a preliminary, the parents of the boy send a relative as intermediary to the prospective bride's house. If the girl's father agrees to the proposed match, the intermediary presents him with a *thaler*, which formally seals the agreement. Then the two fathers meet and fix the day of the wedding. The usual betrothal period can last for two or three years.

On the evening of the day on which the prospective bride is brought to the home of her future husband, all the relatives and friends are invited to a feast. The priests beat the drums, chant prayers,* and, to symbolize the marriage bond, wrap a colored thread around the forehead of the

*Several religious songs executed by the priests will be available shortly on records issued by Ethnic Folkways Library of New York City.

bridegroom. Then the husband and the best man return with the future bride to her house and sleep there. On the next day, at midday, the best man and two relatives of the bride carry her to her husband's house. If the girl has retained her virginity until the bridal night, the assembled people bless her and announce the joyful news to her parents; but if she has lost it, the husband can break the marriage vow, removing the thread from his forehead to betoken his decision. He then takes his discovery to the high priest and his intended wife is immediately excluded from the Falasha community and can never marry a Falasha.

When a man is near death he calls for the priest and some of the elders, and writes or dictates his will. He then confesses his sins (a Christian practice which has become integrated into Falasha Judaism), giving his confessor a goat or a sheep. When he is dead, four men come to the dead man's house and wash his body. These, and all those who touch the corpse during the burial, are rendered impure for a period of seven days and must live outside the village. They perform the usual ritual before returning to it.

If a man dies in the morning he is buried on the same day if there is still time; if not, he is buried the very next day. Anyone can dig the grave, whether a Falasha, a Christian, or a Moslem, but only the appointed four men can lower the corpse into the grave and cover it with earth. After the burial service, the burial attendants repair to the dead man's house and eat peas and drink coffee. If the man was wealthy, his family slaughters a bull or a sheep and invites friends and relatives to a feast. On this day, too, the priests offer special prayers in the synagogue.

The Falasha custom of confession is not only practiced at the time of death but throughout a Falasha's lifetime. Each Falasha has a confessor among the priesthood. Unless his own confessor has died or moved to another place, he cannot change him. The sinner must give his confessor a goat, sheep, or money as a token of his remorse, and the confessor then shares this with the

other priests. Prayers are said by the priests to have the man's sins remitted.

THE Falashas, though having much the same food as the Ethiopians, observe the prescriptions of the Bible with great strictness and eat only those animals that chew the cud and are cloven-hoofed. They are also scrupulous about washing their hands before and after every meal (as is the case with the other Ethiopians) and pronouncing the benediction over all their food. The Falashas do not eat raw meat or animals that have died natural deaths, and observe a very detailed set of taboos against the invasion of such practices.

Although the cultural standards of the Falashas are quite high as concerns hygienic matters, personal relations, handicraft arts, and so on, their general educational level is still very low. Only a very small number know Hebrew, and these are chiefly persons who had the opportunity to study in Europe and the few graduates of the now defunct Falasha school in Addis Ababa. Yet the Falashas are very eager for more education. They could send their children to the government school at Gondar, but since this would involve grave breaches of their religious code, they have not availed themselves of this. Instead, they have established schools in the villages. Unfortunately, these are quite primitive; the teachers are rarely paid for their services and in many villages no separate school building exists.

Despite the increased knowledge of the Falashas and their problems on the part of Western Jewry, they still live in relative isolation. Even many Ethiopians, especially those in regions where there are no Falashas, are not aware of their existence. In general, the Ethiopians think of them as a group apart, using the Ethiopic word *attenkugn*, which means "do not touch me," to describe them.

Even in Gondar, the biggest town in the Falasha-populated region, news of Western Jewish life seldom penetrates. Few foreign newspapers ever reach there, and if they did, only a handful of Falashas could read

them. Nevertheless, the Falashas feel themselves to be part of the international Jewish community. They have, however, no conception of Jewish nationalism and, because religious persecution does not exist in Ethiopia, there seems little chance of such ideas taking root. In their prayers the memory of Palestine is alive and meaningful, but it has a religious and not a national meaning.

During the reign of Emperor Theodore (1855-68), a number of Falashas did make an attempt to journey to Palestine. A religious dispute, which arose between the Falashas and the Protestant missionaries (or between the Falashas and their converts to Protestantism), led them to fear a mass conversion. To escape this, they left their communities and began the long trip to Jerusalem. They left precipitately, unprepared for a long journey, naively expecting, like the ancient Jews, to have their progress attended by miracles. After much trouble they managed to reach the region of Tigre, where most of them perished of disease and lack of food; the few who survived returned to desolate villages.

By and large, however, the Falashas have lived through the modern period quite peacefully (the Ethiopian war of 1936-37 did not affect them too extensively). At the present time one can only guess at the total number of Falashas. If one includes both the compact and separate communities in the regions of Begemder, Semyen, and Tigre, and the scattering of individuals in the larger towns, it is probable that they do not exceed fifteen to twenty thousand.

ALMOST every investigator of Falasha life has had a different explanation of their origin. None of these theories has yet been proved substantial enough to withstand critical appraisal. James Bruce, in his travels in search of the source of the Nile, unearthed the traditional legend that the Falashas originally came from Jerusalem as part of the retinue of Menelik, the son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Joseph Halévy,

the French Semitist, believed that the Falashas were Judaizing Himyarites taken prisoner in Ethiopia by King Caleb; after escaping from captivity, these Himyarites fled to the mountains and converted a group of Agaus, the aborigines of Ethiopia, and the present Falasha type was produced out of this intermingling of racial strains. Jacques Faitlovitch, on the other hand, considers the facial characteristics of the Falashas, their light black skin and finely shaped features, proof of a non-African origin. He contends that they were probably Jewish immigrants from Upper Egypt, descendants of Jews who had returned to Egypt after the first exile.

Rabbi Henry A. Stern, who visited Ethiopia in the 80's, came forth with a truly Victorian hypothesis. "The most probable conjecture," he says, "is, that at a very early period—perhaps when Solomon's fleet navigated the Red Sea—some adventurous Jews, impelled by love of gain, settled among the pleasant hills of Arabia Felix; whilst others of a more daring and enterprising spirit were induced to try their fortunes in the more remote, though not less salubrious, mountain regions of Ethiopia."

It is believed that the Hebraic religion could enter West Africa in ancient times by only two possible routes; from the North, across the desert; or from the East, on the trade route which had been beaten along the fringe of the great tropical jungles. My own inclination is to agree with the many authorities who assert that the Falashas were originally Ethiopians and that they were converted to Judaism; that the most reasonable explanation is that either the Jews of Egypt—a Jewish group lives in Elephantine—or the Jews of Arabia converted them. And, owing to the fact that more historical proof can be found for the existence of contacts between southern Arabia and Ethiopia than between Egypt and Ethiopia, it is more likely that Judaism came to Ethiopia from southern Arabia.